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Tracing language history with tools and methods inspired by evolutionary biology

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Description. Historical research conducted over the past two decades has uncovered a significant number of ways in which importing methods from evolutionary biology and bioinformatics can be fruitful in exploring language (pre)history. This workshop aims to identify the parallels and the differences between language and life as evolvable systems in pursuit of a framework that will investigate language change from the perspective of a general theory of evolution. It will highlight the findings of computational and quantitative historical linguistics and compare them to the results of more traditional, qualitative approaches to language history. Issues to be addressed include the types of data that are most suitable for the reconstruction of genealogical relationships, e.g. cognates vs. morphosyntactic data, the issue of delineating the conservative and/or informative parts of each dataset, and the question of whether sets of characters that have proved themselves useful for certain language samples and time depths can easily carry over to the study of others. Other core themes include the ways computational tools need to be adjusted to language data, how to capture or control for horizontal transmission and common properties arising from chance and/or reflecting language universals, and whether sets of characters that have proved themselves useful for certain language samples and time depths can easily carry over to the study of others. The workshop will bring together researchers working on different dimensions of these issues. It will be funded by the European Union, ERC-2022 ADG PhylProGramm, 101096554.